

Germ Warfare and the Zero-Sum Game

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AS IF THE USE OF TOXIC CHEMICALS and deadly bombs are not enough to bring destruction, some nations are busying themselves with another frontier of warfare - the use of deadly germs as biological weapons.

While there is as yet no report of large-scale use of germs as weapons, lately, there is evidence to indicate that germ warfare did take place towards the end of World War Two. Biological warfare is banned under the Geneva Protocol of 1925.

Theoretically, germs can be used as war weapons. Such micro-organisms can be used to infect human beings, gradually poisoning them. For example, the bacteria *Clostridium botulinum*, a causative agent in food poisoning by secreting the deadly botulinus toxin, can cause severe respiratory depression and death.

Unleashing such toxins through bombs and shells could contaminate drinking water and food supply, killing thousands. Other candidates are rickettsia and viruses. These, however, remain a theoretical possibility.

Closer to reality, a clandestine research programme concerning the development of germ warfare by the Japanese Army which began around the 1930s has been uncovered. According to the book *Factories of Death* by Sheldon Harris, a professor of history in California, Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army was involved.

The range of micro-organisms used includes those capable of causing plague, anthrax and cholera. In fact, the water in wells and ponds in certain areas in China were reported to be deliberately contaminated by cholera and typhoid micro-organisms during the war in China. A recent Japanese investigation found the situation 'worse' than previously thought.

The use of plague micro-organisms are fairly well-documented. Bombs packed with plague-infested fleas have been field tested to see if they could start an epidemic. Plague-prepared cultures were sprayed from planes over a given zone. Plague-infected animals were also used during the war, causing an outbreak that killed more than 30,000 people.

Towards the end of World War Two, it is believed that the Japanese had wanted to use germ warfare in the attack against the United States. Kamikaze pilots would have been recruited to carry plague bombs and dump them in California in a mission codenamed "Cherry Blossoms at Night". The Japanese were also said to have suggested sending anthrax micro-organisms to destroy the livestock in America and create a shortage of food supply.

While the emerging evidence seems to be confined to events in China and the Japanese army, there is no doubt that other countries were also developing their own biological weapons. This is perhaps one of the reasons the Japanese were hesitant to use it against the United States for fear of similar reprisal by them.

In fact, during the Korean War in the 1950s, North Korea alleged that bombs with deadly virus were used by the United States, although this was later denied. Nevertheless, with the advances in microbiology, it is said that germ warfare can be developed with relative ease and without sophisticated technology. Therefore, it is highly possible that one day, germ warfare will be used to breach another time-honoured code, just like chlorine gas was used in World War One and the atomic bomb in World War Two.

Thus, as we conclude this series on the use of deadly materials in warfare, let us take a brief look at the state of the world today. Going by the exhibits at the World Press Photo Exhibition 1995 held recently at Kuala Lumpur, it is sufficient to indicate that our world is beset by tension, skirmishes and wars. The exhibition is overwhelmed by photos of grim faces of agony and sufferings, of pain and death. While each piece can be described as a unique work of art, the subject cannot be described by any other words except that of horror and misery.

The exhibition, thus, is a good reflection of the many of the many warring factions battling one another worldwide. Beginning with Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, the list goes on.

Some are a vivid reminder of genocide and holocaust of yesteryears. Yet the world seems helpless. As it celebrates its 50th anniversary, the United Nations comes under heavy criticism for not being able to prevent the senseless killing among its member states.

What is even more scary is that each of these wars presents an opportunity for using deadly weapons tainted with chemicals, radioactivity and micro-organisms in the desperate attempts to strike a winning blow over the enemy. Hiroshima no doubt epitomises this madness.

In a way, the year 1995 is rather unique because it reminds one of so many morbid anniversaries of bloodshed and tears. Some of the major ones are:

- the 5th anniversary of the Gulf War of 1990,
- the 10th anniversary of the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior by France in 1985,
- the 20th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War in 1975,
- the 45th anniversary of the start of the Korean War in 1950,
- the 50th anniversary of the nuclear explosion of 1945,
- the 80th anniversary of the use of chemical weapons in 1915,
- the 100th anniversary of the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895,
- the 125th anniversary of the start of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870,
- the 130th anniversary of the end of the American Civil War in 1865, and
- the 180th anniversary of the end of the French Revolution in 1815, etc.

All these provide more than ample ghastly and horrific pictures of the consequences of wars. The involvement of the United States is quite significant. This comes as no surprise. While presenting a letter applauding the work of the United Nations recently, 11 Nobel Peace Laureates pleaded to the United States to stop the trafficking of arms.

They remarked that the United States is responsible for 75 % of the conventional weapons sold to developing countries. It is even more pressing now since during the last Non-proliferation Nuclear Weapon Treaty conference (see Healthtrack, Aug 15), the United States and its allies have acquired a permanent license to keep their nuclear arsenals at the expense of the rest of the world.

When the Cold war ended, it was assumed that the world would be a much safer place to live in. It would be free of ideological demagogues and other political differences would have been minimised. Thus, more concerted efforts could be focused on dealing with other global problems of economic and social disparity.

But this was certainly a very naive perspective. The world remains as divided as ever, experiencing many social, political and economic upheavals. As one report puts it: "Where these issues were held in limbo during the Cold War, conflict is now erupting, often fueled by the stockpiles of weapons left behind during the Cold War." This is indeed ironic.

What is most surprising is that "ethnic cleansing" is given centre stage, for the entire "new" world to witness, especially in the former Yugoslavia. The re-making of the holocaust is taking place right in front of our very eyes. We seem to be as helpless as we were when six million innocent lives were wasted in Nazi Germany.

The world has not learnt its lessons.

Even as this column is being written, the slaughter continues as though it is a sacrificial ritual in the initiation of the "New World Order". Srebrenica has fallen to the Serbs forces, despite it being the first of the six "safe areas" established by the United Nations in 1993. Thousands of war victims, mainly Bosnian Muslims, are being driven out of their homeland, and up to 15,000 are reported missing after the fall of the enclave.

And now it looks as though the other so-called "safe areas" are destined for the same fate with Gorazde being the last test of international resolve over the Bosnian conflict. Come October 1995, each member of the United Nations will celebrate its 50th anniversary with blood on its hands.

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